



# Freeway foes fight ADOT plans

## ADOT says 202 plan predates right to vote

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South Mountain Freeway opponents are irked that state transportation planners don't need voter approval to cut three large chunks from South Mountain Park for a 10-lane freeway.

The project is exempt from state and Phoenix ordinances that require voter approval to remove part of state preserve land. That's because the proposed South Mountain Freeway was on the drawing board before the ordinances were passed.

The Arizona Department of Transportation originally identified Pecos Road in Ahwatukee Foothills and 55th Avenue as alignments in 1988. The Phoenix City Council followed that action with a resolution backing the routes.

Those decisions were made before an Aug. 15, 1990, ordinance requiring voter approval for changing state preserve land. "Which I don't think in any way negates the need to protect the land," said Melanie Pai, founder of the grass-roots Protecting Arizona's Resources and Children, or PARC.

Legally, ADOT has the right to continue with its South Mountain Freeway plans, the opposition acknowledges.

"It might provide some sort of justifications, but perhaps we need to revisit the legislation. Even the most well-intentioned voters aren't city planners and may not have the foresight to protect the preserves," said Pai, whose non-profit group has been raising money for a potential lawsuit to block the freeway.

The group, however, is focused first on finding flaws in a draft environmental impact statement ADOT is preparing as required by federal law.

"We haven't ruled out any possibility, although right now our primary purpose is to look at the NEPA (National Environmental Policy Act) process and coordinating amongst these government agencies," said Pai, referring to pushing for a new state law that would supersede the 1990 law.

"We're hoping at some point to show how ridiculous this is, that it's a 20-year-old plan and they'll concede it's not relevant now," she said.

The proposed freeway would finish the last major link of Loop 202 that rings the Valley. It is designed to link the Southeast Valley to west Phoenix by running west along Pecos Road and cutting through South Mountain Preserve to connect to 55th Avenue.

ADOT has said that the \$1.7 billion, 22-mile freeway would mean the destruction of part of South Mountain, the largest municipal park in the country with more than 16,000 acres.

The state transportation agency said in September that the current design would mean the removal of three ridge lines on the mountain. Construction crews would make three cuts up to 20 stories deep and more than two football fields wide.

There is also talk of a possible tunnel through the mountain or gigantic bridge over it, although ADOT officials have said the most likely plan is to cut a canyon allowing for five lanes of traffic in each direction.

"There's nothing new here," ADOT spokesman Matt Burdick said of the latest controversy. "You (we) still have to go through the record of decision from the Federal Highway Administration, you still have to go through the environmental process, you still have to have a decision that's been made by the state and MAG (the Maricopa Association of Governments)."

The Federal Highway Administration has said it will allow ADOT to make the final decision as to whether to build the freeway. MAG will decide whether to fund its construction.

"The question that PARC has made is that we have to get a public vote, but under city ordinances and state statute, South Mountain would be considered a historical assumption," Burdick said. "South Mountain was already within the state highway system and the law primarily exempts projects before that date."

But Pai said PARC doesn't plan on accepting the statute as the last word on the mountain.

"As for voters, sometimes they're only presented with one choice - more freeways," rather than holistic choices, such as corporation incentives like letting workers work from home, said Pai, who's in the software business.

"There's all sorts of alternatives, and what we need here is responsible planning coupled with innovative solutions, not just more freeways," she said. "The bottom line is that long term, we're going to lose some of the best assets we have in this state if we just keep building freeways without any other transportation alternatives."

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